

# FAST FAQs

## (FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS)

### About the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Tax

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#### **1. What is the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Tax?**

A bill introduced by Senator Hargrove was passed by the Washington State Legislature in 2005. It allows counties to pass a 1/10 (one tenth) of 1% sales tax for mental health, substance abuse treatment, and to support court treatment programs. Please see handout RCW 82.14.460. This is NOT a property tax.

Funds collected under this initiative may only be used to provide new or expanded chemical dependency or mental health treatment services and for new or expanded therapeutic court programs.

#### **2. What do we need this funding for?**

The initiative was designed to provide funding for programs where state and federal funding falls short. The Mental Health Program in Stevens County has seen a 6% decline in revenues since 2005. During this same time, the U.S. Consumer Price Index rose by 12%. The Chemical Dependency Program in Stevens County ran a sizeable deficit over the past three years. In 2009, revenues are anticipated to decline further as the state looks to make up an \$8 billion dollar deficit. Despite declining revenues, people are in need of services more than ever.

#### **3. What is the need for Mental Health Treatment in Stevens County?**

The Washington State Department of Social & Health Services has estimated the prevalence of mental illness in our state to be 3.83% for adults and the prevalence of "Serious Emotional Disturbance" to be 7% for youth. According to the Washington State Office of Financial Management, the total population of Stevens County on April 1, 2007, was 43,000 people. This means there were an estimated 1,168 adults with mental illness and 875 youth suffering from Serious Emotional Disturbance in Stevens County in 2007. During that same year, the County Mental Health program provided treatment to 624 adults and 274 youth. Even so, we estimate that as many as 200 children and 300 adults in our county have not accessed needed mental health care.

#### **4. What is the need for Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment in Stevens County?**

The Washington State "Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse" has estimated that almost 11% of adults living in our state need Drug and/or Alcohol Treatment. Based on the 2007 population of Stevens County, this means there are an estimated 3354 adults in our county in need of alcohol and/or other drug treatment. During that same year, the County Alcohol and Drug Treatment Provider assessed and/or treated 676 adults. Even so, we estimate that as many as 1300 adults in our county have not accessed needed alcohol and/or drug treatment.

**5. Why can't these people be helped by someone else for free, like friends, family, or churches?**

People seen at the County Counseling Center suffer from debilitating illnesses like Major Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia, and Drug Dependence. Most have already tried to get help from their families, support systems, and churches. As beneficial as that help is, it often times isn't enough and "bridges are burned" as a result of the chronic and severe problems. Yet quality mental health and substance abuse treatment services have been scientifically shown to reduce health care costs, medical and psychiatric hospitalization, emergency room visits, crime and criminal justice costs, social service and welfare costs, and improve family functioning, employment, and worker productivity.

**6. Why should my Commissioner vote to pass this initiative?**

Many people with mental illness and/or substance abuse issues are seen repeatedly in the criminal justice system and in the health care system. This causes the cost of these services to rise, and neither the criminal justice system nor our local medical health care systems are designed to treat serious psychiatric or substance abuse problems. Thus, people with mental illness and/or substance abuse problems that do not receive effective treatment cost taxpayers more money every time they encounter the criminal justice system or our health care system.

**7. How does this initiative help save money?**

We are already spending tax funds to address the emergency needs of this population in our medical and criminal justice systems. According to the Washington Community Mental Health Council, the average cost per client for community mental health services is under \$5,000 per year. In contrast, the average annual cost of incarcerations is \$27,000 and the average annual cost of psychiatric hospitalization is \$70,000. This tax is an opportunity for the local community to more effectively direct our tax dollars to our priorities [not Olympia's] and address the mental health and chemical dependency issues in our community.

**8. Why can't we use money in our current budget?**

Current tax funds collected by the County are already allocated to meet a variety of state and community mandates. In addition, the portion of state funding received locally to address these needs has already been directed for specific uses and has been diminishing since 2005. It was this exact situation which led the State Legislature to approve this local taxing option that allows us to create or expand direct services to our identified community mental health and chemical dependency priorities.

**9. This sounds like a burdensome tax. Why should I support it?**

It amounts to one penny on each \$10 purchase of non-essential goods. Food, for example, is an essential good which is *not* taxed. If you buy a \$2500 big screen television, for example, this tax will add an additional \$2.50 to the purchase price.

**10. Won't the county just use the funding for roads or courts, anyway?**

The law strictly forbids the use of these funds for anything other than new or expanded mental health and chemical dependency services.